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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [UNGA](#) [KISL](#) [KIRF](#) [SA](#) [VT](#)
SUBJECT: HOLY SEE ON SAUDI PROPOSAL FOR UNGA INTERFAITH HIGH LEVEL
DIALOGUE

REF: A. VATICAN 44 AND PREVIOUS
[1](#)B. VATICAN 67

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CLASSIFIED BY: Julieta Valls Noyes, DCM.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

[1](#)1. (S) Summary: The Vatican and the Saudi government apparently have reached agreement on revisions to the Madrid Declaration, the ostensible outcome document for the first round of their inter-religious dialogue. This could pave the way for Vatican concurrence to a high-level discussion at the UN about the dialogue. That concurrence could disintegrate if the Saudis or others press for any resolution or other outcome from the UN session, as the Vatican feels strongly that political bodies should not comment on religious matters. For the same reason, the Vatican will continue to oppose an OIC-backed proposal for a defamation of religion resolution at the UNGA this fall. Regardless of what happens at the UN, however, the Vatican will continue to pursue its discussions with the Saudis, and other Muslim leaders in different fora, to advance freedom of religion in countries with Muslim majorities. End Summary

Initial Vatican Discomfort

[1](#)2. (S) In a series of meetings with Vatican officials and diplomats accredited to the Holy See on October 10 and 14, Embassy Vatican examined the evolving Holy See position on a Saudi proposal for a United Nations discussion on inter-religious dialogue. In separate discussions with Monsignor Ortega, the point person on the Arabian Peninsula at the Holy See's ministry of foreign affairs, and Monsignor Akasheh, the Head Officer for Islam at the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue; and over lunch with, inter alia, British Ambassador Francis Campbell, Canadian Ambassador Anne Leahy, and Irish Ambassador Noel Fahey (who had all recently discussed the Saudi initiative with Cardinal Tauran, who manages inter-religious relations for the Holy See), we learned that:

-- The Vatican is uncomfortable about having the UN - a political body - get involved in religious matters. The Holy See objected quietly but forcefully to a Saudi proposal for a Special Session of the General Assembly to discuss inter-religious dialogue.
-- The Vatican was especially concerned that the Madrid Declaration, the unilateral outcome document from the initial session of the Saudi-led dialogue, was the proposed basis for discussion at the UN Special Session. The Holy See had considerable problems with this document, including its uncoordinated call for a UN meeting on the inter-religious dialogue, its omission of the theme of religious freedom, and its failure to mention equality of all human beings, regardless of gender and religious affiliation.
-- The Saudis persisted in pressing for Vatican agreement for a

UN discussion. They agreed to modify the Madrid Declaration to persuade the Vatican to accept a watered-down proposal for a High-Level Dialogue (HLD), rather than a Special Session, at the UNGA on this topic.

Apparently Successful Vatican-Saudi Talks

13. (S) Late last week, Monsignor Akasheh confirmed that very discreet talks were underway to revise the Madrid Declaration, a fact apparently unknown as recently as last week by many Holy See officials including Monsignor Ortega. Cardinal Tauran told Ambassadors Campbell and Leahy this weekend that the extremely private negotiations had just ended successfully, though this is not yet public. Moreover, outside of a small circle of Vatican and Saudi leaders, no-one yet knows what the new document says. It would be significant -- but surprising -- if the Saudis moved toward Vatican positions on equality regardless of religion or gender. It is unlikely that the changes include any reference to freedom of religion, however, as Monsignor Akasheh said last week that was too much to expect from the initial agreed document.

14. (S) Other religious groups present at the Madrid session (most notably the Jews, but also Buddhists and others) apparently were not/not included in the latest negotiations. Hence, their views are not necessarily reflected in the "new" Madrid document.

Holy See Views on Saudi Intentions

15. (S) Understanding Vatican motivations in the Saudi talks may be helpful in analyzing how the Holy See will manage the UN HLD, plus future talks with Muslims in general and the Saudis in particular. Many of our Holy See contacts - especially in the foreign ministry - have expressed concerns to us about Saudi intentions in proposing the dialogue and the subsequent UN discussion. They believe the Saudis were motivated not by a

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desire for dialogue, but by ulterior political motives: the Saudis wanted to establish themselves as the pre-eminent voice of Islam in discussions with the Church. As evidence, Vatican observers point to the timing of the Saudi proposal for dialogue, on the heels of the establishment of Church discussions with moderate Muslims associated with the "A Common Word" initiative, supported by a Jordanian foundation (ref a). (Moreover, the proposed date for the UN HLD comes less than two weeks after the next round of Vatican talks with this more moderate Muslim group.)

16. (S) Vatican officials who manage inter-faith initiatives -- led by Cardinal Tauran (also the former Vatican Foreign Minister) - dismissed concerns about Saudi political motivations in arguing for renegotiating the Madrid Declaration. They saw continued dialogue as essential to increasing pressure on the Kingdom for greater internal religious opening. (Ambassador Campbell offered that the Holy See also agreed to the talks with the Saudis because it is more comfortable dealing with an absolute monarch rather than with a group of disparate, potentially divided Muslim scholars with limited political influence.)

Likely Vatican Positions at the UN

17. (S) Now that the Vatican apparently has achieved its twin objectives of blocking a higher-profile High Level UNGA event on inter-religious dialogue and renegotiating the Madrid Declaration, it seems unlikely that the Holy See will press to delay the high-level event on this topic. Nevertheless, many at the Holy See remain wary of being manipulated by the Saudis, and the Holy See might engage diplomatically for a delay of the event under certain scenarios. All our contacts have made it clear that the Saudis have not yet coordinated with the Holy

See about the agenda for the HLD or its proposed outcome. The Vatican would be dismayed if the Saudis or their proxies press for a resolution, an UNGA Presidential statement or any kind of substantive outcome or comment from the HLD about the inter-religious dialogue. Any HLD role for the Alliance for Civilization, an organization which Ambassador Fahey said the Holy See regards with considerable distrust because of its membership, could also sound alarm bells. If the Saudis pursue any of these options, we expect the Vatican will express private disagreement to the Saudis or UN leadership. Vatican officials may then, as Monsignor Ortega did several times with us last week (and admitted to doing also with the French, Poles and Dutch), ask other countries to weigh in to exert "healthy pressure" on the Saudis to do the right thing.

18. (C) Meanwhile, our contacts at the Vatican have also expressed strong and growing unease about the "defamation of religion" resolution under consideration by the UNGA Third Committee (ref b). We anticipate that the Holy See representatives at the UNGA will continue to lobby against it in their own way, through general public statements and in diplomatic discussions with like-minded countries. We do not expect Vatican officials to confront the measure's supporters directly about the initiative.

Comment: After the UN Talks

19. (C) Regardless of what happens in New York with the HLD or religious defamation resolution, the Holy See will want to continue its dialogue with the Saudis and its separate dialogues with other Muslim leaders and scholars. The Vatican considers such discussions crucial for the protection of religious minorities, and especially Christians, in Muslim-majority countries. This foreign policy priority trumps all others to date in the papacy of Benedict XVI, so our contacts tell us they "will never set pre-conditions" for their talks with the Saudis or other Muslims.

GLENDON